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Temporal Belongings



Interview Series Number Six

Anna Coote
Head of Social Policy,
new economics foundation

Michelle Bastian
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Arts & Humanities
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Anna Coote is Head of Social Policy at the new economics foundation, leading work on developing a new social settlement to meet the challenges of the 21st century. This aims to promote well-being for all and sustainable social justice. It includes practical work on: moving investment and action upstream to prevent harm; changing the way we use and value time; building a fair, sufficient and sustainable social security system; transforming public services by developing co-production as the standard way of getting things done; and safeguarding the interests of future generations.

This interview was conducted as part of the AHRC-funded Sustaining Time project (www.sustainingtime.org). The project asks, if clock time helped build industrial capitalism & the idea of a speeded-up, networked time supports late capitalism, what kind of time would support alternative, sustainable economies? It took place in October 2013 and has been edited for length and clarity.

Why time?

MB: Thanks for chatting with me today. To start I just want to ask, quite generally, why do you think it's important for people working on issues to do with sustainable economies to think about time?

AC: Well the first thing is to be clear what you mean when you say sustainable economy, because I've heard George Osborne use that phrase.

MB: Ah yes, of course.

AC: So it can be used to mean sustained growth. But you're talking about an environmentally sustainable economy I take it. So if you're trying to build a sustainable economy, in those terms, you will need to use time differently for two main reasons. The first leg in the argument is if you want a sustainable economy it has to be an economy that is not growing, at least in the rich world. And if it's going to be not growing you're likely to have less work to go round in the conventional sense of the word. If you want to have fewer hours of work without creating more inequality, you've got to start distributing the paid time more equally across the population. And the best way to do that is to have shorter standard hours of paid working time. So in other words time helps us to manage a sustainable economy.

And the second reason would be that you need to use time differently so that we're not living the kinds of busy lives that require a lot of convenience consumption – for example flying or going by car when you could travel more slowly. Or it might be about growing and producing food, or repairing things instead of throwing them away, or making clothes instead of buying them

and so on. So it would be about trying to live at a pace that enables you to live with low carbon consumption, the premise being that low carbon living requires more time.

Time: abstract or everyday?

MB: Have you found it difficult to bring up time as an issue related to sustainable economies? Is it something that people respond to or can it seem a bit abstract?

AC: I think it depends who you're talking to. There are some people who've been working on the issue of managing a sustainable economy who have come to the conclusion that time is important and so that's easy, and then there are other people for whom it sounds a bit fresh. There's always the problem with people thinking you're talking about alternative lifestyles as opposed to sustainable lifestyles, so the kind of thinking that suggests "it's all a bit marginal and not really very important and we've got to get back to the real business of running the economy" – there's that sort of logic that comes into play as well I think. So it can be difficult and it does just depend who you're talking to.

MB: I find that question particularly interesting because coming from a background in philosophy, I've also had the experience of time seeming very intimidating and abstract. So I wondered about what kinds of ways of talking about time resonate with people's lives, rather than just being seen as an abstract academic question.

AC: Well rather the reverse, because what we've found, a bit to our surprise really, is that everybody is interested in time as an issue. Most of the people we know have problems with their time. They're too busy, they feel rushed and hurried. Now this is not just because we're living in an unsustainable economy, but because of the patterns of time-use in late phase capitalism, where you can work anywhere, anytime. You can't separate your life out into work and the rest of your life, or into paid work and unpaid time, in the same way as you could before. Modern communications and social media and emails and everything else just add to the things you have to do every day. If you suddenly stop using your mobile phone or your email, you can see this added work very clearly.

WHAT WE'VE FOUND, A BIT TO OUR SURPRISE REALLY, IS THAT EVERYBODY IS INTERESTED IN TIME AS AN ISSUE. MOST OF THE PEOPLE WE KNOW HAVE PROBLEMS WITH THEIR TIME.

MB: Yes, a few people I interviewed have mentioned that actually. When they had a break from being online, even if it was for a short time, they found it very difficult.

AC: Well I lost my phone the other day and it was four

days before I got a phone that I could use again. To start with, it was horrifying. I felt completely bereft, but after a few days I began to feel a bit liberated actually. Because I had told everybody I knew that I had lost my phone nobody was expecting me to get back to them and I had more time on my hands.

MB: I have some software called Freedom that allows you to block the Internet on your computer and it's funny, although I often put off using it, when I do actually turn it on, I breathe a sigh of relief. Only being able to do one thing at a time can feel so relaxing.

AC: Yes.

Time, money and value

MB: So the next question related to the way time, money and value get knitted together in particular ways within capitalism. It can be assumed that the only valuable use of your time is to earn money, and the only valuable time is time that is getting paid for. And so I was just wondering whether you see your work as challenging that particular configuration and if so, how?

AC: Well yes, the work that we do at nef has tried to put this at centre stage, this issue about what is valuable and what isn't and how value is assigned. You can see this even just starting with our critique of GDP and how measuring GDP is not a reasonable way of measuring the success or prosperity of a country. We've argued instead that we need to measure wellbeing.¹ And then in relation to time and how time is valued, we've written quite a lot about, what we call, the core economy, which is the uncommodified relationships, resources, that underpin the formal economy. We've pointed out how this is not valued, it is invisible, it has no price attached to it and, as you say, things are only valued if you can put a price on them. So another thing we argue is that we have to reclaim that sense of value. If you've read the introduction to our book *Time on Our Side*, you'll find it all in there.²

MB: Yes, well what has been really interesting in the case studies I've done for this project, is how many individuals are struggling with this. On the one hand they know that they don't need or want to be paid for all the work they do, and so they are happy to work as a volunteer. But on the other hand they still struggle with the feeling that despite what they believe, a part of them still feels that they are not being valued properly. They might at times feel resentful, or taken for granted. They might find that friends and family are very critical of them for 'doing work for free', they'll say they are 'crazy' or that

they are exploiting themselves somehow.

So it's been really eye-opening to see the very personal struggles that people experience as part of doing that kind of re-valuing work that you talk about. Even for people who are so committed to doing things differently, there can still be a personal battle to try and think about time differently, because some of our assumptions are so ingrained.

AC: Well if you talk to anyone who is moving into retirement, having come out of paid work, this is a real live issue for them. I mean quite a lot of my friends have got to that stage of their career now and they feel that they're doing nothing. So that's the alternative to doing paid work it seems. It's always, "Well I'm not doing anything now, I'm retired." But in fact most of them are doing an awful lot of things, which include looking after grandchildren, looking after their parents, seeing friends more often. It might include volunteering, it depends. So it's a real struggle too for identity. Not for everyone, some people don't have a problem with it, but there are many people who find they have a complete loss of identity when they leave paid employment. There's probably quite a big literature on that.

Interventions into time

MB: Yes, there would be I imagine. So next, I wanted to ask what you thought about the possibility of rethinking time and challenging dominant ideas of what it is and how it should be understood. Particularly because across a range of different bodies of research there seems to be the idea that part of what is involved in making the world a better place (however you might define that) is challenging ideas of time. There's been a lot of work on challenging ideas of identity and challenging gender norms etc, but there is also this idea that time is something that you could design differently, that time itself could be open to critical reflection and reworking.

AC: Yes, I agree.

MB: And I was really interested in the way there are actually quite a few different examples of where nef is intervening in people's sense of time as part of your work. Things like the 100 months clock³ and the No Catch Investment⁴ for example, propose a time-based

³ The One Hundred Months clock counts down to the date by which it is estimated atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases will begin to exceed a point whereby it is no longer likely we will be able to avert potentially irreversible climate change. See the clock here: <http://www.onehundredmonths.org/> and read about the estimation process here: <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/one-hundred-months-a-technical-note>

⁴ The No Catch Investment argues for a short term, but significant, reduction in fishing to allow for the replenishment of stocks and to enable long-term sustainability <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/no-catch-investment>

¹ See <http://www.neweconomics.org/issues/entry/well-being>

² Find information on this publication here: <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/time-on-our-side> For an overview of nef's work on the issue of work and time more broadly see: <http://www.neweconomics.org/issues/entry/work-time>

intervention, and then of course the 21 hours campaign.

AC: And also our work on time banks⁵ and co-production⁶ (which is time-based and requires you to put your time in).

MB: Yes, so I just thought that was interesting and I didn't know if it was an explicit thing for you – shifting time, remaking it as part of remaking economies?

AC: Well [laughs], nice idea, perhaps we'll do that, but we're not doing that really consciously now. But we have tried to highlight time as an important element in how we envisage a new economics if you like, which includes the economics of time. But having alternatives, which would include the 100 months clock and things like that--, that's interesting. Perhaps what that does say - which we haven't really capitalised on or made much of - is that you can use time as a flexible concept, but most people think it isn't.

Last time I was at a seminar talking about our book, there was a very wonderful female economist there

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who's done a lot of work on gender and pay and things like that, and she was very disturbed by the idea that time was not just discreet units, that time could have different value for different people in different contexts. Barbara Adam talks about this of course. Her work has been really helpful for the project, and also Valerie Bryson's work, as well as others who have written about the idea that time can be a gift rather than something that you sell.

So if you want to campaign about the environment and time is running out for doing something, then you could use a particular kind of clock. But if you're talking about regenerating communities for instance and using asset based development (which is what we do quite a lot of work on in our team), you would talk about a different kind of time there, because people are giving time and it can be quite flexible and they might be doing more than one thing at once. So that case would be much more about emphasising the open-ended use of time that is partly gift, partly exchange. So yes, I'm just agreeing with you. You use it in different ways to what I would, and I don't think we've done anything like what you are talking about to show how there are different ways of using time, except what's in *Time on Our Side*.

Futures via the past?

MB: So next I wanted to ask a few questions from the perspective of pasts and futures. First, I was wondering

⁵ See here: <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/time-banks>

⁶ See here: <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/co-production>

about the role of the past as a source of inspiration. In contrast to narratives of progress, where the past continually becomes obsolete, there seem to be a lot of examples of people looking at how things were done in the past and how some of this might be recuperated to develop a better future. I wondered how you saw this kind of approach?

AC: Yes, well partly through Andrew Simms,⁷ I've been involved in a Medieval evening where you try to recall the ways people did things differently in Medieval times, how they valued things differently and so on. The trouble with that is we are so completely bought into the idea of the future being better than the past (even though nef would criticise it ourselves), that it's very hard to use it with any effect I think. To ask, for example, what we could learn from it. Of course as historians we all know there are lessons to be learnt from the past, but usually when you talk about learning these lessons you still talk about adapting them to today's requirements in a way that will enable you to continue this so-called progress. I just think it's very hard to do that without appearing quaint and nostalgic.

I think nostalgia is a problem because it has become a tool against radicalism. After all, it's about conservatism if you think about it. So you've got the problem with nostalgia and conservatism working against the need to realise that we are not on an infinite trajectory that is going from worse to better. We know that we're not, because of all the environmental evidence, but using references to the past can be very difficult because you have to overcome those barriers.

MB: Yes, a lot of people I've spoken to for the project have said something similar. They are conscious of people misunderstanding their work as nostalgic, or even as wanting everyone to 'go back to the Dark Ages'. I'm really interested in the way that, as you were saying, ideas of time and progress can be used as a powerful tool for cutting off discussion about particular issues. You can read reports from the World Food Organisation, for example, where they suggest that small-scale farming is old fashioned and large-scale is progressive. And without clearly citing statistics or other research, they can just say 'this is old' therefore it's bad and 'this is new' therefore it's good. So it's really interesting how these implicit assumptions about time can shut down thinking about opportunities for sustainable futures.

AC: It is, you're right, it is.

Time horizons & the long-term

MB: So what about the future then? And specifically the importance of long-term thinking within a sustainable economy. I've heard quite a few people saying they

⁷ A nef Fellow and former Head of Policy for nef. <http://www.neweconomics.org/people/entry/andrew-simms>

were inspired by the idea of thinking seven generations ahead, and there is the Clock of the Long Now that is trying to support thinking 10,000 years into the future. So I wondered what kind of horizons, both forward and backwards, are important for nef? How far into the future does the idea of the 21 hours working week go for example?

AC: Yes, well of course if you're dealing with policy, as we are, you've got to be aware of the fact that most of the people you are aiming your ideas at have got such a short attention span that they can't think beyond the next election, or even beyond what their constituents said to them in the surgery last Friday. So while we might think ahead up to 2050 for example, a lot of the work we do has to be tied into political cycles. So in that case we're thinking about 2015 and perhaps 2020. And it's important to think in these terms because it is necessary to think about the steps that you have to take to get from where you are to where you want to be. You have to think about the sequences of time from the present into the future and how you can do things incrementally. So thinking ahead is no excuse for not thinking about transition. Do you see what I mean?

MB: Yes definitely. In Transition Towns, for example, there is the idea of the Energy Descent Action Plan, where you are thinking forwards, but you're coming back to the present and working out what steps need to be taken to get from here to there. Back-casting rather than fore-casting.

The feeling of time

MB: So to move on to another way of approaching the question of time, I wondered about issues of rhythm, pace and speed. You mentioned the importance of doing things more slowly, of slow travel etc., so would you see the 21 hours initiative as being related to the Slow Movement?

AC: Yes, I'm quite interested in it. We don't have a lot of active links with them but yes, the Cittaslow and Slow Food movement and things like that. I'm interested in the need to come off the fast lane and living life at a pace that enables you to live sustainably. And that certainly chimes with what the Cittaslow movement does, and the Slow Food movement up to a point – although that has slightly different objectives. The emphasis on using your time in a different way is important. Your time is not simply a bundle of units that you sell to other people at a price. It is something that you use in a range of different ways in order to live, so that you can go on living, and future generations can go on living as well. Linked to this is our other interest in future proofing policies. How do you develop a better understanding of the impacts that the policies and practice that we have today will be on future generations? What mechanisms can you use to make

sure that policies are future proofed? So we're currently seeking out funds to see whether we can do some work on that.

MB: It sounds fascinating.

AC: Yes it is interesting, but it's quite an ambitious plan so I don't know how far we'll go with it. But there's the World Futures Council, and various other organisations and academics, who have been interested in this question of intergenerational equity for a long time. But nobody has come up with a plausible plan for ensuring that it happens yet, which is what we're trying to do. It will depend on whether we can get funding for it.

MB: Fingers crossed then, but just to go back to this idea of rhythm. I've been asking about their own rhythms to get an idea of what is the tempo of actually doing the work of trying to build alternative economies. How does it feel for the people doing it? So, if you don't mind, can you share anything you've done to 'do time differently', either just for yourself or within nef more broadly?

AC: Well a lot of us work part time, so that's something. I work four days a week and most of my team are on three or four days. It's not something we do across the board, but there are quite a lot of people doing so-called part-time work. But, in terms of the rhythms in my own life-- , I'm just impossibly busy the whole time, which is horrible.

MB: Yes, well I feel the same. It's been very interesting leading a project on "Sustaining Time" and experiencing an almost ridiculous clash between what I'm working on and what my life is actually like.

Managing the time of change

MB: But so, the final question I wanted to ask was about time and theories of change. There is a connection between them in that when you have a linear model of time our stories of how change is supposed to happen often look linear too. For example, an individual decides what they want to do, they plan out the steps, implement them and the hopefully achieve their goal. But within discussions of systems thinking and resilience and so on, the stories of change are more about seizing the right moment, about tipping points, unexpected effects and so on. Here change is non-linear and unpredictable. So in thinking about shifting towards a 21 hour working week I wondered how that process of change is imagined?

AC: Interesting question. I think I tend to be quite spontaneous in the way I approach things, which is not always good if you're trying to manage money and people. It's easier to use a linear model of time if you're trying to get things done and be accounted for. It's very hard to implement change in other ways. I'm not sure

about systems thinking and how that would change things. It might give you a broader view of what you're doing, so you would need to concentrate on more than one thing at a time, but I wouldn't have thought that it would necessarily change the way you use time. But certainly, seizing the moment and trying to work with the idea of tipping points would suggest that you would have times where you might be reflecting or doing other things and then have to rush to fit in with the moment where you thought you would be most effective. I think this is what you're getting at, am I right?

MB: Yes. Well it's been interesting talking with people about the project management systems they've used, for example. Some have used PRINCE2,⁸ or other systems, but they have suggested that they have had to adapt those systems when they work with communities. You can't force volunteers to show up on time like you might with paid workers, so they have had to be more flexible and less linear in their planning. For people who are using co-production models, they have recognised more clearly the way you can't plan the project out in advance. Instead they have had to be more open to what arises in the moment and that there are some aspects of the future that are unpredictable rather than plan-able.

AC: Some aspects yes, but the trouble is if you're worried about a sustainable economy, as you put it, you can't just say, "Oh well, anything goes, let's just let it look after itself." Whereas in other walks of life possibly achieving set targets might not be so important, when it comes to thinking about environmental sustainability the passing of time in a linear way is very important isn't it? You've got to try and change things by certain dates, so it does require building a momentum around change and time. But even then, I don't use PRINCE project management I'm glad to say. I was given lots of aversion therapy to PRINCE in earlier jobs I've been in so I wouldn't dream of using it now, and you don't need it. But I suppose you do need project management systems if you're working in a very large organisation.

MB: So that was actually all the questions I had, was there anything else you wanted to say?

AC: Well just that I think there's a huge job to be done to enable people to understand the difference between time as a gift and time as a commodity. It might seem very basic, but I think there's a huge mountain to climb and so I'd be interested to see how this, or future, projects might help with that.

MB: Ok, well thanks for your time. It's been lovely to chat.

AC: Yes it's been nice talking. Thanks.

⁸ PRINCE is an acronym for "PRojects IN Controlled Environments" see <http://www.axelos.com/prince2>

Temporal Belongings

The Temporal Belongings research network supports the development of a more coordinated understanding of the interconnections between time and community. We provide opportunities to share research and practical experience and to develop new collaborations. We also produce resources that will support the development of this research area. To find out more about our activities go to: www.temporalbelongings.org

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